

Handout 3: D'Aragona on Dishonest vs. Honest Lovers

Tullia d'Aragona, born in Rome around the turn of the 16th century, was a philosopher, poet, and *cortegiana honesta* [honorable courtesan], or a sex worker, recognized and praised for her intellectual abilities. In this excerpt from her *Dialogue on the Infinity of Love*, she distinguishes between honest and dishonest love.

The original 16th century text is in the left-hand column, with a colloquial translation in the right-hand column. Read both, and note any questions you have about the translation.

Excerpt from Tullia d'Aragona's <i>Dialogue on the Infinity of Love</i> (1547) <i>Tullia d'Aragona is speaking, stating her view to her interlocutor, Varchi.</i>	
Original	Translation
[...] this word “love,” since it can stand for various types of loving, is a polyvalent noun. [...] Leaving all possible subdivisions aside, let me say that love is of two types. We shall call the first “vulgar” or “dishonest” love, the other “honest,” that is so say, virtuous.	The word “love” can mean many things. Let's just say there are two kinds of love. The first is “dishonest” love. The second is “honest” love.
Dishonest love—which is found only in vulgar and lowminded individuals, that is, in those whose souls are low and vile, who lack virtue or refinement, whether they come from noble or insignificant stock—is generated by a desire to enjoy the object that is loved, and its goal is none other than that of common animals. They simply want to obtain pleasure and to procreate something that resembles themselves, without any further thought or concern.	Dishonest love is a desire to experience pleasure and make babies. Those who have dishonest love do not give it much thought. Dishonest love is found in those, rich or poor, who are dumb and vulgar. Their desire is like the desires of animals. They just want to enjoy the object of love.

Those who are moved by this desire and who love in this guise, as soon as they have reached their goal and have satisfied their longing, will desist from their motion and will no longer love. As a matter of fact, they may quite often recognize that they have made a mistake, or get fed up with the time and trouble they have put into it, and so they turn their love into hate. [...]

Once dishonest lovers have satisfied their desire for pleasure and babies, they will stop loving. They may even realize that they made a mistake or wasted their time. This makes them resentful of the one they love and turns their love into hate.

1. Why do you think d'Aragona calls this kind of love "dishonest"? What is dishonest about it?

Honest love, which is characteristic of noble people, people who have a refined and virtuous disposition, whether they be rich or poor, is not generated by desire, like the other, but by reason. It has as its main goal the transformation of oneself into the object of one's love, with a desire that the loved one be converted into oneself, so that the two may become one [...]

Honest love is found in people who are virtuous and refined. It does not matter if they are rich or poor. Honest love does not come from desire but from reason. The honest lover's goal is to turn themselves into the one that they love. The lover wants to merge with the one that they love so much so that they become one.

[I]n order to effect a total identification with the beloved, and since this corporeal unity can never be attained, because it is not possible for human bodies to be physically merged into one another, the lover can never achieve this longing of his, and so will never satisfy his desire. Thus, he cannot love with a limit, as I concluded earlier. Although one could extend the description of these two types of love indefinitely, I consider what I have said sufficient to demonstrate that my conclusion is entirely valid.

The lover can never satisfy this desire because two bodies merging together to become one is physically impossible.. As a result, the lover's desire and love is endless. I could go on and on about this, but I think what I have already said is enough to prove my point.

2. D'Aragona's language of two lovers merging into one is similar to the idea of lovers "completing each other" or saying that someone is your "other half." What does it mean to "complete" someone or to say that someone is your "other half"?

Reflect:

3. Dishonest lovers only want pleasure and babies. Honest lovers want to complete each other. Do you agree with d'Aragona that honest love is better than dishonest love?
4. Do you think that Romeo and Juliet were honest or dishonest lovers? Did they want to complete each other or only want pleasure?
5. According to d'Aragona, satisfying honest love is impossible and the striving to become one will go on forever. If she is right, can this explain the tragedy of Romeo and Juliet?